strange fires

The Other Side of Discipleship

by **Lawrence A. Pile**

The January/February 1990 issue of *Ministries Today* featured a striking cover of solid black lending stark prominence to the words, "' Discipleship was wrong. I repent. I ask forgiveness.' -- Bob Mumford." For those familiar with Bob Mumford and the movement associated with his name, this is a rather astounding statement. For those less familiar with him no doubt question marks began flying: "What Discipleship is *wrong*? How can that be? Why repent of teaching discipleship?"

Such questions are understandable, not only considering the spate of books and articles in the past several decades advocating discipleship, but also in view of the Lord's expressed command to "go… and make disciples of all the nations…" (Mt. 28:19). So, of what was Mumford repenting? Other questions were probably elicited by the title of the lead article describing the circumstances that brought Mumford to offer his apology. Written by Jamie Buckingham, the lead article was entitled "The End of the Discipleship Era." Again, apart from familiarity with Bob Mumford and others one would associate the "discipleship era" with the 2,000 year history of the Christian Church, and that era is not scheduled to end until the return of Jesus Christ.

What is actually being referred to, however, is a movement begun in 1974 by charismatic teachers Mumford, Derek Prince, Don Basham, Ern Baxter, and Charles Simpson. Officially called Christian Growth Ministries, the movement quickly became known as the "shepherding" or "discipleship"

movement because of the leaders' strong emphasis on what they saw as the believer's need to submit to an authoritative "shepherd" for the purpose of being "discipled" in the Christian life.

Though essentially a biblical concept, what soon developed in many of the CGM churches was an abusive authoritarianism that ultimately robbed many individuals of their liberty and autonomy in Christ. As Buckingham reported, "Critics cited numerous examples of 'shepherds' who required their 'sheep' to ask permission before they dated, changed jobs or made major decisions." (1)In his formal statement of repentance Mumford said

Accountability, personal training under the guidance of another, and effective pastoral care are needed biblical concepts. True spiritual maturity will require that they be preserved. These biblical realities must also carry the limits indicated by the New Testament. However, to my personal pain and chagrin, these particular emphases very easily lent themselves to an unhealthy submission resulting in perverse and unbiblical obedience to human leaders. Many of these abuses occurred within the sphere of my own responsibility.(2)

The movement began to disintegrate in 1986 when its magazine, *New Wine*, folded due to steady loss of revenue. In the latter years of the 1980s Baxter, Basham, and Mumford officially "released" their disciples from their previous pyramidal authority structure -- Prince had already severed his formal ties with the others in 1983.

Yet even with Mumford's public statement of apology -- and in spite of Buckingham's obituary of the "discipleship era" -- the abuse of discipleship and spiritual authority continues unabated by other men and women in other churches and movements.

As long ago as April 1976 Russel T. Hitt wrote an article for *Eternity* magazine entitled "The Soul Watchers" in which he described spreading abuse of pastoral and discipling authority in several well-known Protestant Charismatic, Evangelical, and Roman Catholic movements and denominations. In an editorial entitled "Of Shepherds, Fiefs, and the Flock" the editors of *Christianity Today* wrote, "The temptation to control people is often Christianized by spiritual strong men who present a benign persona." (3)And in a 1985 article with the title "Disciple Abuse" (*Discipleship Journal*, Issue Thirty) Gordon MacDonald wrote, "Abusive disciplemaking begins when someone seeks people with the conscious *or unconscious* aim not of growing or leading them, but of controlling them. Sadly, this can be -- and often is -- effectively done in the name of discipling. **The extremity of this tendency is cultism**" (emphasis added). (4)

In addition to the apparently now defunct Christian Growth Ministries of Mumford and company, there are at least *seven* other more or less well known national and international movements that continue to practice a similar style of discipleship. Besides these there are any number of smaller associations and individual churches that fall into the same category. In my ministry of counseling victims of spiritual abuse at Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center in southeastern Ohio I have personally worked with former members of a multitude of separate organizations that fit this general pattern. From a strictly *doctrinal* standpoint none of these would be labeled "cults" in the sense understood by most Christians -- that is, each of these movements and churches holds the fundamental doctrines considered by conservative, evangelical Christians to be essential to salvation. And yet former members and concerned outside observers have charged these organizations with varying types and degrees of spiritual abuse.

What forms does this abuse take? Ronald M. Enroth has given considerable help in recognizing the dangers of this other side of discipleship. He has identified six primary characteristics of groups or churches that practice disciple abuse. Taken from his article "Churches on the Fringe," (5) they are: (1) control-oriented leadership; (2) isolationist attitudes; (3) spiritual elitism; (4) lifestyle rigidity; (5) discouragement of dissent; and (6) painful exit.

Groups with these restrictive characteristics I have labeled *"totalist aberrant Christian organizations*" (TACOs). They are "**totalist**" by virtue of their attempts to control almost every area of the member's life. They are "**aberrant**" in that they teach doctrines and practices that, though they cannot be called actually heretical, they are yet "eccentric" in the literal sense of "off center" -- out of line with historic, orthodox Christianity. Thus they must be recognized as genuine, if non-mainstream, "**Christian organizations.**" The term TACO is appropriate for another reason: the groups are so close to the truth, and the error is so subtle, that when one tries to get a grip on the problem one has great difficulty holding things together long enough to get a good "bite" on it! These things will be made clear as we look more closely at each of Enroth's points (under slightly different labels), beginning with one he doesn't mention specifically.

1. Scripture Twisting. Enroth (and others who have studied these groups) would agree that all other characteristics of shepherding/discipleship groups derive from this one. ***Lack of care in reading, interpreting, and applying Scripture leads to all manner of abuse and just plain goofiness, not only in TACOs but even in otherwise good churches.*** Especially prevalent in the former, it is through such misreading and misinterpretation that demands for total submission to authoritarian leadership (Enroth's first point) are supported. The failure to read Scripture in its historical and cultural context, as well as the textual context, may result in insistence on fringe practices such as communal living, or refraining from such modern social activities as dating or movie-going. There may be other reasons for enjoining, prohibiting, or regulating such things, but the mere presence or absence of biblical examples is not among them.

In fact, probably *all* totalist Christian groups fail to distinguish adequately among scriptural commands, principles, and examples. If they can find an example in the Bible of someone living the way they think *all* Christians should live (e.g., Abraham, Moses, or Paul) they will teach that lifestyle as a divine mandate for all. Most TACOs foster a zealous, aggressive manner of evangelism supposedly based on the Apostle Paul's example, taking his charge to follow his example as meaning literally *to do everything he did*, totally ignoring (for the moment, at least) his extensive teaching on the differing gifts distributed among the church members by the Holy Spirit, and the differing ministries assigned to each by the risen Christ.

Perhaps even more serious a problem in such groups is their common practice of elevating to the status of biblical commands their own individual applications of general principles. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 10:23, "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify." The question that should immediately spring to mind is, "What are the things that are not profitable and that do not edify?" Paul doesn't say here, but before this principle can be acted on we need to know what those things are. Totalist "shepherds" will gladly *tell us* what they are, but ***the problem is that unless God has specifically prohibited them somewhere else in Scripture, these things are merely the "shepherd's" opinion.*** Each believer needs to learn to go to God directly in prayer and the study of the Scripture to seek the answer to this question in any particular situation. No church leader has the right to legislate where the Bible is silent. The most they can do is offer their best advice and counsel, but advice and counsel it must remain.

Another type of Scripture twisting is what I've heard called "hermeneutical anarchy" -- reading, interpreting, and applying Scripture as if there were no rules that need to be followed in doing so. The result is often total confusion and chaos as verses and passages are artificially cobbled together to force the Bible to say something it doesn't. This is the method followed by such organizations as Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, the Unification Church (the "Moonies"), and others in setting dates for the return of Christ or the end of the world. It also results in a great deal of "spiritualizing" of Scripture. What has become for me a classic example of this was perpetrated by the founder of one TACO with which I was associated for 5 ½ years in the 1970s. While sharing his testimony during a Bible study, this man said the Lord had assured him that he would one day be married, and the verse that gave him this assurance was Is. 34:16 (emphasis added):

> *Seek from the book of the LORD and read:Not one of these will be missing;*
> ***None will lack its mate.*** *For His mouth has commanded, And His Spirit has gathered them.*

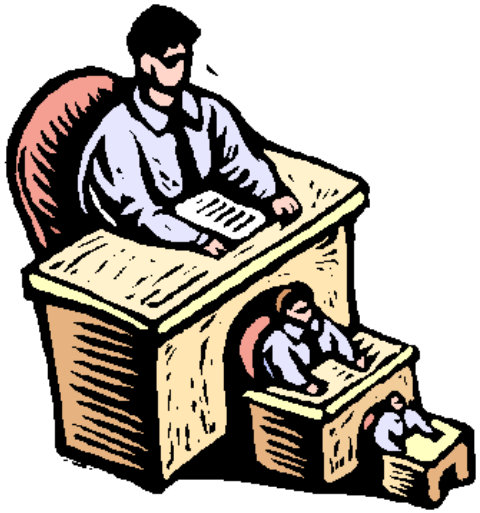
I went up to this brother after the meeting and pointed out that that particular verse had *nothing* to do with human marriage at all. In its context it is a reference to the utter destruction of the nation of Edom, illustrating the totality of the devastation by stating that no humans will be there to interfere with the wild beasts and fowls in establishing their homes and raising their families. *People* are not referred to *at all*! His response was, "I know what I said was not the actual *interpretation*, but I still feel it is a legitimate *application*." But it is not even that. A legitimate application should have a good deal more connection to the passage and its true interpretation than this leader's "application" did.

One other thing that leads to Scripture twisting and abusive discipleship is simple carelessness in reading the Bible. A failure to observe clearly what the text actually *says* has often resulted in faulty and harmful interpretations and applications. For instance, teachers who insist that one-on-one discipleship is either crucial or essential to growing to maturity in the Christian life often do so on the basis of 2 Tim. 2:2 ("And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.") The problem is this text says absolutely *nothing* about one-on-one discipleship in any form. In order to read that concept out of the verse one must totally ignore the entire phrase "in the presence of many witnesses." Paul is not saying that he taught Timothy one-on-one and that Timothy also must teach others one-on-one. Instead, he is describing a *group* setting in which he taught Timothy along with others, and is simply instructing Timothy to pass that knowledge on to still others who will then be able to do the same thing. Paul isn't telling Timothy *how* to do this, just that he *must* do it. As a matter of fact, there is *not one example* of even the Lord Jesus practicing one-on-one discipleship. The smallest number we see him work with at one time is *three*. There *are* times when one-on-one discipleship is the most appropriate form of teaching or counseling, but Scripture itself does not support the notion that it *must* be done that way.

Further examples of various kinds of Scripture twisting will be given in the discussion of the remaining characteristics of totalist churches.

2. Autocratic Leadership. Shepherding/discipleship groups place great stress on the need for the "sheep" to submit to the authority of the "shepherd" with little or no right to question him. This is especially true when it comes to making major decisions such as: buying or selling a house, car, or major appliance; changing jobs or college majors; planning vacations; moving to another city; selecting a life-partner; and raising and disciplining children. The leadership's authority is often made to apply in quite minor and mundane matters as well, however. A female member of one such group was so affected by the authoritarian leadership of her elders that she was unable to decide on the purchase of a *shower curtain* without their advice! One prominent leader and teacher in the movement of which her group was a part is on record as having taught that 20% of the Bible is black, 20% is white, and 60% is gray. In the first two areas God's will is clear and unmistakable; in the last the *elders* have the authority to tell the individual what to do. As Chuck Smith has written "[Shepherds] seek to exercise *complete authority and control* over your life… You must submit to the shepherds in

all areas of your life that they deem important and necessary. To refuse to do so is to be marked as a rebel." (6)



This authoritarianism is frequently justified by verses like Heb. 13:17 ("Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you"). Such shepherds seem unaware of the fuller meaning of the Greek word translated "obey" in this verse. According to W.E. Vine, "The obedience suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion." (7) Conveniently ignored, too, are numerous other passages admonishing elders not to lord it over those in their charge (1 Pet. 5:3; cf. Mt. 20:25-28; 3 Jn. 9-11). Further, such spiritual autocrats arrogate to themselves prerogatives and responsibilities God never meant for them to have. By enforcing submission to their authority in areas not covered by Scripture or in matters of conscience and opinion they are unwittingly usurping the place of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

The consequence of this is that the group members fall into an uncritical acceptance of whatever the leader says, and lose the ability (if they ever had it) to go directly to God for wisdom and guidance.

3. Isolationism. To varying degrees members of TACOs are kept separated from the world outside the group, ostensibly to avoid worldly contamination, sinful temptation, doctrinal error, and flagging zeal. One wonders, though, whether, as Ron Enroth suggests, such isolation is not actually "a not-so-subtle attempt to limit access to legitimate supplementary teaching which may, for various reasons, be viewed as competitive and even threatening." (8) Many former members of shepherding groups assert that this is indeed the case.

This isolationism takes forms very similar to what Robert J. Lifton, in his now-classic study of Chinese Communist thought reform techniques, calls "milieu control." (9) The degree to which this is done in TACOs is rarely as extreme as in the Korean War prison camps and "re-education" centers in Communist China which were the focus of Lifton's study, but it is effective nonetheless. Group members are encouraged to read only books by "approved" Christian authors, often only those produced within the group itself. Members are discouraged from listening to Bible teachers of other churches and organizations because they haven't seen the full truth of God's Word, otherwise they'd be "with us." Secular literature, including even the classics, is often frowned upon as being "unspiritual" and a waste of time.

This isolationism is carried into the realm of personal relationships as TACO members are often counseled to sever close friendships with non-Christians and even Christians who are not members of their group. They are warned that unsaved family members will not understand, or agree with, their desire to serve God as a member of the group, and that even Christian relatives may become the member's enemies. Involvement in outside activities, clubs, and organizations is also discouraged or forbidden on the grounds that it will distract the TACO member from his primary purpose -- this extends even to other *Christian* organizations. As for relationships with the opposite sex, most TACOs strongly discourage dating, and some actually forbid it. Again, most such groups teach a semi-mystical notion of divine match-making, and many require couples to obtain permission of group leaders before marriage, and some go so far as to actually *arrange* and even *compel* marriages. In all TACOs only group members are considered ideal marriage partners, sometimes the *only* proper partners.

4. Spiritual Elitism. Closely connected with this practice of isolation is what I call a "Laodicean Syndrome." TACOs typically consider themselves to be "the closest followers of New Testament principles," "God's Green Berets," "God's Storm Troopers," "a special move of God," etc. Ron Enroth quotes a former member of one such group: "Although we didn't come right out and say it, in our innermost hearts we really felt that there was no place in the world like our assembly… We thought the rest of Christianity was out to lunch." (10)

This attitude of elitism contributes to the isolationism mentioned above, especially in the form of ecclesiastical introversion where group members are discouraged from having too much to do with non-member Christians, particularly outside preachers, teachers, and writers. Ultimately, all Bible teaching originates within the rarefied atmosphere of the movement or group out of fear that outsiders might "poison the minds" of impressionable group members with contrary ideas.

A former member of one TACO wrote, "[Our movement] was founded on a divisive basis as an alternative to the Laodicean churches from which most of its leaders came… The movement survives only as long as its adherents can with a clear conscience label outsiders as 'Laodicean,' otherwise the movement loses much of its *raison d'être*."

In his book *Wellsprings of Renewal* author Donald Bloesch writes, "While most of the communal experiments seek to work within the wider church and give support to its ongoing mission, an increasing number of such fellowships, especially in the United States, see themselves as embodying a higher life and purpose than do the churches. The ever present temptation in vigorous movements of reform and renewal is to become self-righteous and self-sufficient and thereby immune from criticism by fellow Christians." (11)

In recent years a number of the more prominent charismatic shepherding/discipleship groups have been networking together in conferences, writing articles for each other's magazines and newsletters, and so on. But by and large, TACOs rarely cooperate with other churches or organizations, unless they see a chance to proselytize from them. The founder of one movement had the effrontery to say, when his own organization was still wet behind the ears, that he would be glad to work with Campus Crusade for Christ, but Bill Bright would have to submit to *his* authority! A related characteristic of many totalistic groups is their tendency to create their own versions and imitations of others' creations, whether they be magazines, newspapers, political action lobbies, home schooling programs, publishing houses, recording companies, investment firms, or even daily devotionals. The apparent intent is to provide a total package for their members so they will not have to go outside the organization to "second-best" groups and associations for any reason.

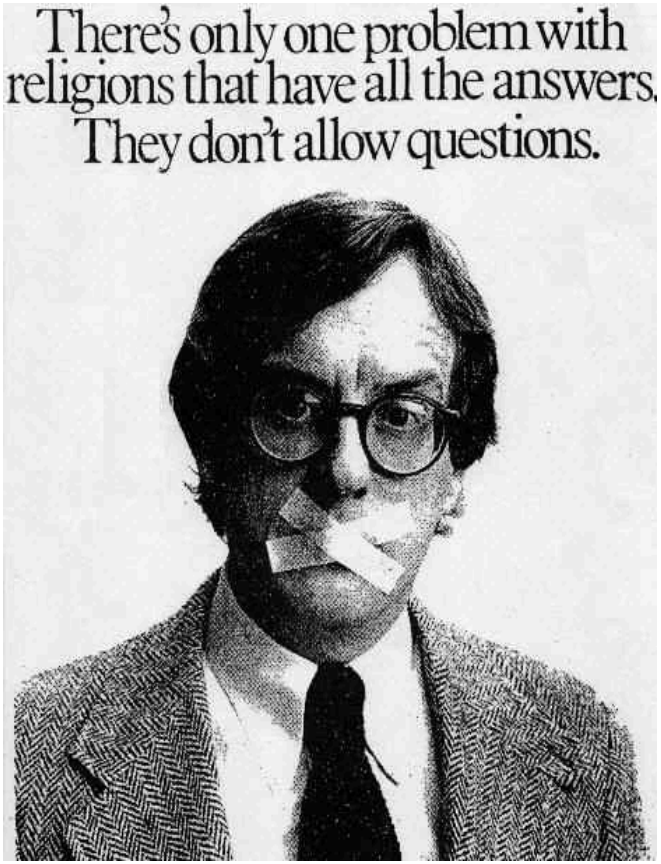
5. Regimentation of Life. In their attempt to foster a high degree of commitment to Christ, "true discipleship," and holiness of life (essentially different ways of saying the same thing) TACOs create a hothouse environment in order to "force" this growth. This goes way beyond the biblical standard of explicitly enunciated morality, ethics, and values. Totalist groups establish their own standards in a generally sincere attempt to apply scriptural principles to life in a practical way. In so doing (as mentioned above under point 1) they too often fail to distinguish clearly between actual commands and their own applications of general principles, confusing the latter with the former. They also treat certain examples, such as the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul, as mandated for all Christians without exception.

The result of such an approach to discipleship is that group members are given very specific rules and regulations, as well as unspoken expectations, by which to live, encompassing many quite mundane and trivial aspects of life. In addition, most of such rules and standards are based simply on the leader's personal opinions, tastes, and values, rather than on clear pronouncements of Scripture. For example, Enroth reports that "[w]earing striped running shoes is considered homosexual fashion in [the late] Hobart Freeman's Faith Assembly." (12)

The most serious consequence of such regimentation of life based on extra-biblical rules is the inculcation in the members of a Galatian-style works righteousness. The fundamental heresy refuted by the Apostle Paul in his letter to those churches was not *justification* by works, but rather *sanctification* by works. The false teachers of Galatia were saying something like this: "Paul only told you *half* the gospel. What he told you just got you over the threshold into the kingdom of God; to make further progress you must be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses." And what totalist "shepherds" teach is little different, though their teaching in this regard is more by unspoken implication than by explicit precept: "Your faith in Christ got you saved, but to press on to spiritual maturity you must render unquestioning submission to us and do whatever we tell you." But Paul's words ring as loudly and truly today as they did when he first penned them: "It was for freedom that

Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

6. Disallowance of Dissent. This characteristic of TACOs is also related to their generally strong penchant for isolationism. One of the main reasons for isolation (TACO leaders would call it "*insulation*") is so members will be compelled to look only to their leaders for instruction and guidance. It almost goes without saying, therefore, that the former would be expected to be submissively receptive to the latter, obediently suppressing any questions or disagreements with teachings or practices of the group.



As a matter of fact, probably *all* totalist organizations -- whether religious, social, or political -- regard "unity" (or "solidarity") as the prime doctrine. Even in totalist Christian groups unity ranks just below the "fundamentals" of the faith: inspiration and authority of the Bible, the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the personhood of the Holy Spirit, and salvation by faith alone. As important as unity in the church really *is*, the "unity" promoted in TACOs is really more of a *uniformity* as members are expected or required to adopt not only similar lifestyles, but also the same beliefs and interpretations of Scripture.

This rules out the option of disagreement and independent thinking in many areas usually permitted in most evangelical churches. One extensive TACO with 70-80 fellowships in about half the states in the Union until recently required unanimity concerning what they considered the biblically mandated strategy to reach the world with the gospel -- a "spiraling out" process they found commanded in Acts 1:8. Even though this verse contains no command at all (only a statement of fact), people were literally excommunicated from churches associated with this movement because they expressed doubts or disagreements with this teaching. And the irony is that in consequence of this "strategy," although their very name implies a strong missionary thrust, it was more than 20 years from their founding before they sent their first permanent, fulltime missionary overseas! In fact, the greatest missionary outreach by any of their number has come when some invested their Christmas or summer holidays with Operation Mobilization or similar organizations, or *after* they severed their ties with the movement and then left for the mission field. But the doctrine of the "strategy" continued to be held beyond dispute

until only a few years ago as an example of another of Robert J. Lifton's characteristics of thought reform, the "sacred science."

In most TACOs the prohibition of dissent and disagreement extends to anything that could be construed as "undermining the authority" of the pastor, elder, or "coordinator" (or whatever other title they may use) -- and this means especially that one simply does not try to correct a leader *publicly*. Even attempts to do so privately usually backfire on the one so bold as to try. Enroth tells of one young man who was disfellowshipped because he "asked too many questions." The young man explained that the founder of the group would sometimes "pray against the blight of independent thinking." (13)

Very frequently the leaders of totalist fellowships are adept at turning the tables on dissenters, even those who come to them privately with sincere and humbly expressed concerns about certain aspects of the group's teachings or practices. Rather than acknowledge any degree of validity to the questioner's concerns, the leader typically will assert that the only problem is with the questioner -- it is plain, he will say, that the latter has a "rebellious spirit," "a bad heart," and that if he'd just "get with the program" he'd see the correctness of the teaching or practice he now questions. Persisting in such questioning, particularly when the questioner shares his doubts and disagreements not just with the leadership, but with the rank and file, will ultimately lead in all TACOs to the 7th and final characteristic.

7. Traumatic Departure. The individual who is slow to submit to his leaders by desisting from raising disquieting questions and concerns will ultimately undergo a stressful confrontation referred to by some former members who have experienced it as a "surprise party" or "gang-up." Often the "rebellious" person is invited to the home of an elder or pastor, ostensibly to be granted an opportunity to air his grievances fully in order that the leadership might clearly understand them and then be able to respond to them appropriately. Upon arrival, however, the dissident discovers several other men in positions of authority have also been invited, and what he thought would be a sincere and honest one-to-one exchange of views and considerations turns out to be a hostile and accusatory 4 or 5-to-one interrogation session, (14) often lasting several hours until late into the night, with the objective of persuading the dissident to cease his "divisive" questioning and/or recant his "slanderous" charges.

In his book *If You Really Want to Follow Jesus...* Bruce Barron quotes one former member's description of his own experience at such a meeting: "It was not unlike a police interrogation. They have you looking in a certain direction and keep you from looking out the window. You sit down and they stand up, because that gives you a feeling of inferiority." Barron continues in a paraphrase of this ex-member's description, "Each time, he said, more than one head [i.e., leader] was present; rather than give him a chance to explain his grievances, the leaders questioned him and reproved his disobedience."(15)

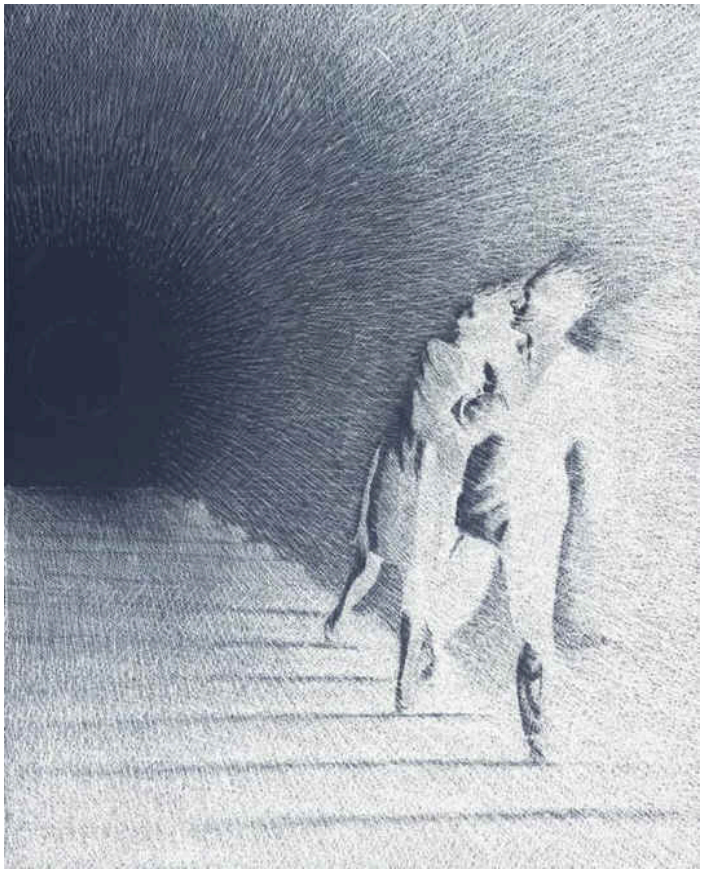
In some TACOs leaders have reportedly forced their way into the homes and apartments of dissident members in order to confront them about the "sin" and "rebellion," again usually in lengthy nighttime visitations, and sometimes (hopefully rarely) even resorting to physical abuse. These tactics often achieve their goals, at least temporarily. The experience of the "late-night gang-up" is usually so traumatic that the target individual will frequently agree to anything just to avoid a repetition of it. He may eventually choose simply to leave the group rather than to stifle his objections or risk another such encounter.

Sometimes these sessions bear permanent fruit. A young man in a Mid-West branch of one TACO wrote a well-reasoned rebuttal of the movement's founder's assertion that New Testament-type apostles exist today (and his implication that he was one). Subsequently this member underwent a "gang-up" that succeeded in achieving his complete confession and repentance of this "sin." Even though his scriptural right and responsibility to judge the teachings and practices of his church (16) had been denied him by his leaders, he was so thoroughly persuaded of his "error" that he was able to write a testimony to the "joy of repentance," published a few months later in the movement's magazine, which contained the following remarks:

> *…I never had the intention of undermining the authority of my local elders, and becoming the cause of a church split or faction. Nevertheless, …I found myself paving the road to division, strife and destruction of the very church I loved… …[S]landerous accusations were cast against leaders of other churches associated with ours who were barely known to their accusers.I was probably the chief of all sinners in such actions. By crafty words and untimely comments, I helped to spread suspicion and fear in the hearts of many. I thought I was helping to establish "unity" in the church, and protecting the freedom to hold different ideas based on scripture. But actually I was resisting scriptural unity (unity under God-given authority) and was only spreading strife. On February 9, 1985, four Christian brothers, in gentleness and love, rebuked my sin of spreading strife. Though it was hard, I publicly confessed and renounced my sin. I honored the discipline [i.e., excommunication] of those who refused to repent (including my closest friend), and for the first time in my life, I got wholly under spiritual authority and obeyed them, as Hebrews 13:17 commands…*(17)

Later this man rose in stature to become one of his organization's attorneys, with offices in its headquarters suite, and actively sought to silence vocal critics of the movement, including the present writer.

Totalist Christian groups have been known to excommunicate people for simply not honoring the "discipline" of previously excommunicated members. They have also threatened to disfellowship any member who might have the audacity merely to attend a gathering of former members (even *unexcommunicated* former members) who were going to discuss the problems they saw with the group and explain why they had left it. Still other people have been formally excommunicated from



TACOs up to a year or more *after* they voluntarily withdrew from membership. (It's like the boss who exclaims to the disgruntled employee, "You can't quit; you're *fired*!") In such cases the reasoning is that the former member has become such a threat to the stability and cohesiveness of the group they need to put him beyond the range of influence -- and what better way to do this than to excommunicate him, thus forbidding members to have any further contact with him?

Regardless of how a dissident member leaves a TACO, it is almost always a very painful process. Whether he leaves voluntarily, under pressure, or is excommunicated, he finds himself cut off from most or all of his formerly close friends (and sometimes relatives) who remain in the group. Frequently he must find new living quarters, having lived in communal housing or roomed with one or more group members. In some cases ex-members have had to change jobs because they no longer felt comfortable working with or for members of their former church or fellowship. Marriages have even been destroyed as one partner has become so desperate to escape not just the group but *any* influence from it that he or she has felt it necessary to dissolve the marriage bond to do so. In cases where the departing spouse has *not* wanted to dissolve the marriage union, TACO leaders have sometimes counseled the remaining spouse to do so.

Even more tragic are the numerous nervous breakdowns and suicides of individuals no longer able to cope with the totalist environment and unable to see any way out. After following a friend out of their TACO one girl wrote to describe her state of mind when she left: "When I left, I knew something was wrong, but I thought it was *me*. I thought they were right, even to the extent that I equated leaving them with leaving God. And I was so unhappy I was ready to take even that step to escape… When I left… I felt that I was *running for my life*." (18) One measure of this girl's desperation is the ironic fact that the means she used to flee the group was enlisting in the Army!

Clearly, *no* God-fearing, Christ-glorifying, Scripture-obeying church or Christian fellowship should *ever* tolerate, let alone *create*, a climate that would make *any* of its members so desperate for relief that they would be willing even to run away from God. Unhappily, all too many churches and

Christian organizations in America and abroad have been doing just that. Yet, almost without exception, the motives of the founders and leaders of such churches and organizations are unimpeachable. Their earnest desire is to save souls and build disciples of the Lord Jesus, and they have devised a system, method, or environment which they believe will achieve those commendable goals most quickly. They believe that without their authority and close supervision -- and the members' corresponding submission -- the discipling process cannot go forward, or at the very least that precious time will be lost.

So, as stated above, they have created a "spiritual hothouse" and employ methods and inculcate attitudes foreign and often antipathetic to the Scriptures, and in the process intrude into the ministry of the Holy Spirit, not allowing him to do his own work in his own way and in his own time. What happens all too frequently in TACOs is that the Holy Spirit, for all practical purposes, is supplanted in the member's heart and life by the group, its leader(s), and its teachings -- even in charismatic TACOs with all their emphasis on the *gifts* the Holy Spirit. After all, if one has a list (explicit or implicit) of approved and disapproved activities, beliefs, and attitudes for every area of life -- or if one is expected to seek direction from one's leaders for every major and most minor decisions -- what use does one have for the Holy Spirit? But God doesn't want us to rely on external guides or guidelines for spirituality; he wants us to rely on *him* and his written Word. He gives us teachers and pastors to help us make the right decisions and sort out truth from error; but they are not to take his place in our lives.

It was this kind of works-oriented "gospel" the Apostle Paul had in mind -- particularly in the form of *sanctification* by works -- when he exclaimed to the Galatians, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:6-8). Paul calls Christian legalism "a different gospel" and says it is a distortion of the gospel of Christ. Jesus did not give his life on the cross in payment of the penalty of our sins just so we could exchange one bondage for another one. No, he died to *liberate* us from sin *and* slavery, and we dishonor him as well as disobey him when we subject ourselves to *any* form of slavery involving attempts at self-perfection. In sanctification as in justification there must be nothing of human effort, nothing of which man may boast. Again, the Apostle Paul said it best: "But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14). (19)

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ENDNOTES

(1) Jamie Buckingham, "The End of the Discipleship Era," Ministries Today, January/February 1990, p. 46.

(2) Bob Mumford, "Mumford's Formal Repentance Statement to the Body of Christ," Ministries Today, January/February 1990, p. 52.

(3) Anonymous editorial, "Of Shepherds, Fiefs, and the Flock," Christianity Today, volume, issue, date, page number all unknown, but photocopy in author's possession.

(4) Gordon MacDonald, "Disciple Abuse," Discipleship Journal, Issue 30, 1985, p. 26.

(5) Ronald M. Enroth, "Churches on the Fringe," Eternity, October 1986, pp. 17-22.

(6) Chuck Smith, "Shepherding or Discipleship?" The Answer for Today, No. 6, 1979, p. 2, emphasis his.

(7) W. E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 17th edition, 1966) Vol. III, p. 124.

(8) Enroth, ibid., p. 20.

(9) Robert J. Lifton, Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).

(10) Ronald. M. Enroth, "Voices from the Fringe," Moody Monthly, October 1989, p. unknown, but photocopy in author's possession.

(11) Donald G. Bloesch, Wellsprings of Renewal (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 97-98.

(12) Enroth, "Churches on the Fringe," p. 21.

(13) Enroth, "Voices from the Fringe," p. unknown.

(14) In one case with which I am familiar the ratio was nine or ten to one.

(15) Bruce Barron, "If You Really Want to Follow Jesus…" (Sycamore, IL: Partners Press, 1985), p. 73.

(16) See 1 Th. 5:19-22; Acts17:11; 1 Cor. 14:29.

(17) Anonymous, "The Joy of Repentance," The Cause, Vol. 3, No. 6, June/July 1985, p. 21.

(18) Letter on file with the author.

(19) Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, copyright 1971 by The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, California.